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Fear

In Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, the main character, Willy Loman, is a man drowning in fear. He is drowning in a fear of the unknown: a fear of how others perceive him, a fear of his failure as a father, and a fear for his son’s success. His lack of self-improvement, regardless of reflective acknowledgement, spells disaster as his mental fortitude decays with each turn of the page. For a man so immersed in obvious contradiction, he seems unwilling to correct himself to provide any sort of individual mental benefit. Rather, his voluntary passivity evolves into an overarching fear of the world, a fear which manifests in outward verbal lacerations towards the very people he should be praising.

The most obvious fear bearing its burden on Willy’s increasingly weakening back is his obsession with how other human beings perceive him. Perpetually extolling the benefits of those who are “well-liked” versus those who are merely “liked”, Willy is indicating his strong ideal, or rather insecurity, that in order to be a success, one must garner the affection of those around him/her. Specifically Willy’s flashback with Biff and Happy in Act One illustrates such. As Biff brags about stealing the football from the boy’s locker room, Willy laughingly tells him to return it, only to add that the only reason the coach isn’t upset is because he “likes” Biff and that “if somebody else took that ball, there’d be an uproar!” (18). Furthermore, within two pages of dialogue, the character Bernard attempts to persuade Biff to do his math homework only to have Willy demean him for being appearing “anemic” (20). Willy then goes on to describe Bernard (who, again, was trying to help Biff) as “liked” but not “well-liked” and that it is for this reason, that on graduation, Biff and Happy are bound to be “five-steps” ahead of Bernard (20). Obviously, such is not the case considering Biff’s current lack of occupation. This blatant juxtaposition of our protagonist’s false foreshadowing and Bernard’s sincere but failed effort to help Biff illustrates with detail the irrationality with which Willy raises his children. Willy’s fear of society’s perception, disguised as advice to succeed, ultimately fails as seen in the opening scene of the play in the fact that Biff has now moved back home, an obvious sign of severe distress for a 34 year-old man. Such a fact also hints towards Willy’s failure to communicate proper ambition to his children

Willy’s fear of failing as a father materializes in Willy’s memorable conversation with his now-passed Uncle Ben. Looking for some sort of verification from Ben on the parenting of his boys, Willy attempts statements of masculinity like “It’s Brooklyn, I know, but we hunt too.” (35). Just previously mentioning Willy’s lack of identification with his own father, Miller here is hinting that Ben is as close to a father figure to Willy as he ever had. Such is also evidenced in Willy’s quest for information of his father from Uncle Ben just prior. Not only does it appear clear that Willy craves emotional validity from a now dead man, but Willy also fails to acknowledge Ben’s obvious shortcomings, shortcomings which are clear even in Willy’s potentially and likely distorted memories, or perhaps visions. Grasping at straws in advice from Ben, all Willy manages to extract is “When I walked in the jungle, I was seventeen, When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!” (37). This obscure phrase seems to suggest material success in reference to being rich, but there is certainly a multitude of possible interpretations, none of which would be firm advice to Willy unless such was specifically dictated to him. Settling on using said advice to “imbue” his sons with the spirit of walking into a jungle, Willie finds temporary solace in his own mind (37). However, Biff’s continued lack of material success amplifies Willie’s fear of failed parenting, a clear indication that said “jungle” advice is by no means sufficient, especially without direct explanation from the partially materialized Uncle Ben. Willy’s lack of firm direction in parenting is not only the prominent reason for his fear of shoddy fatherhood, but it is also a more than pertinent factor in his fear for his son’s lack of, or rather what Willy perceives to be as a lack of, success.

Although Willy Loman is a man inclined to antagonize, we as the reader or audience, are inclined to sympathize. Willy is faced with the constant reality of attempting to make ends meet at the age of 63, and despite his verbal rants of pessimism, he wants the best for those he loves. Specifically, he wants the best for his children, so much so in fact that he sincerely fears for his children’s success. Perhaps stemming from his fear of failed parenting, Willy Loman adds yet another fear of the unknown to his breaking back, the fear of Biff’s unknown future. To elaborate further, Willy’s misguided goals which he communicated to his children are part of the reason for Biff’s own inability to settle down and live as a stereotypical 34 year old man “should” live. What is interesting however, is that although it would seem implied that Willy be aware of Biff’s inadequacy due to misguided parenting, he at the same time refuses to admit such. Instead, he consistently praises in Biff what he emphasized as they were children, likeability. For instance, at the conclusion of the first act, Willy tells Biff that he “has a greatness” and then immediately reminisces about the physical appearance of Biff at a football game (50). Rather than praise Biff for some inward quality, he verbally highlights his physique, an element of likeability as opposed to a component of capability. This ability to acknowledge without acceptance pits Willy in a prison of fear, for he is perpetually subjugated to fear so long as he refuses to even attempt to cope. This refusal is indicative of Willy’s central fear, the fear of change. Viewed from a slightly altered perspective, one can see this as a further fear of the unknown, for it is unknown whether any attempted change will actually alleviate his burden despite effort put in.

“What man does not understand, he fears; and what he fears, he tends to destroy.” (Yeats). Willy Loman is man struggling with a fear of the unknown within himself. He fears what others believe as well as what his kids believe about him; but most of all, he fears what he might possibly believe about himself. Willy Loman refuses to pass judgment on himself for fear of him having to accept himself as a failure. He does not understand himself because he will not accept his actions as possibly wrong, and as a result, he destroys himself. This destruction materializes in Willy’s clear mental deterioration and his inability to have a conversation void of inward hypocrisy and outward accusation. As long as Willy is unable to objectively reflect, and in turn accept his actions, he is doomed to drown in a fear of the unknown.

Open-Ended: If Willy acknowledged his own failures, would he still commit suicide?